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COMM 427 - Project Summary

The Myth of Objectivity & The News Media

Objectivity is the cornerstone of the modern news media. Dan Schiller writes in a book titled, Objectivity And the News:

An invisible frame brackets news reports as a particular kind of public knowledge and a key category in popular epistemology. News reports repeatedly claim that, ideally at least, they recount events without the intrusion of value judgments or symbols. News is a map, a veridical representation, a report on reality, and hence not really a story at all, but merely the facts---this is the claim. But news---akin to any literary or cultural form---must rely upon conventions. Formally created and substantially embodied conventions alone can be used to contrive the illusion of objectivity. How else could we recognize news as a form of knowledge?

One has to wonder, however, given the appearance of uncaptioned reenactments in network news programs and the emergence of tabloid tv whether the news media's claim to objectivity is beginning to unravel. Do these trends show a more fundamental problem with the claim for objectivity?

Is "objectivity" really just a term used by the news media for reporting that reflects middle-of-the-road sensibilities with all other views labeled as extremist and not-objective?

The problem is that Reality is a multi-directional multi-sensual phenomenon and news writing is a linear abstraction of this multi-directional multi-sensual phenomenon. Something of the Reality has to be stripped away in its conversion from being essentially a three-dimensional thing to the two-dimensional symbol used to express the thing. Something has to be left out, someone has to choose the language and the medium employed. In view of this necessary editing process one has to wonder where objectivity fits in. Does everyone see the color green the same? If not then the thought that we can convert Reality into specific words and pictures without substantially altering its component nature is seriously flawed.

I hope to show that explicit cultural awareness and a policy of fairness towards the continuum of human points-of-view are the next step that journalism must make if it is to retain its credibility as a reliable source of information. I also hope to show that given the human factor (that we all exist within cultural parameters that define for us things as fundamental as our use of language) and the time/space constraints of news distribution that absolute objectivity is as impossibility.

Machines can record a facet or facets of Reality but it is human to define and structure the recording into something useful. To abrogate or deny this role is itself a claim against the news media's claim of objectivity.

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